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AUTHOR Prigmore, George T.
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ABSTRACT

Development of the creative, emotive, critical, and aesthetic skills can offer a way of looking at human experience--a philosophy of Henri Bergson--different from that offered by science and logic. The development of such skills is the goal of the humanities program, and a survey of over 500 exemplary programs indicated a number of characteristics typical of good programs. A non-dogmatic approach, a free classroom climate, and the use of an inductive, team-teaching method are essential, although a variety of teaching methods should be used. The humanities curriculum should be spiral, extending over a number of years, and should be considered a vital part of the school's overall plan. The faculty should be committed to humanistic values and should teach students, not courses. The humanities program should be open to all students for exposure to a wide range of experiences relatable to their own lives and for encouragement in creative expression. Resource materials and speakers drawn from the community can supplement materials within the school to achieve course objectives. (LH)

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TO PLAY WITH MAMMETS *

by

George T. Prigmore

We believe in a well-balanced school curriculum in which music, drama, painting, poetry, sculpture, architecture, and the like are included side by side with other important subjects such as mathematics, history and science. It is important that pupils, as part of general education, learn to appreciate, to understand, create, and to criticize with discrimination those products of the mind, the voice, the hand and the body which give dignity to the person and exalt the spirit of man.

- The American Association of
School Administrators: 1959

It has now been ten years since the AASA position just quoted. In that decade a host of other education-related organizations and agencies have echoed similar sentiments. Nor was AASA the first to sound the clarion creed recognizing the values inherent in developing those humane qualities with which every human being is endowed. But, as it is a long way in the liturgy from the Credo to the Agnus Dei, so it seems to be an almost interminable space in the mass of education between the statement of intention and the application of benefits derived therefrom.

There are several ways of knowing things: some things are best learned one way, some another. Certain skills and knowledges are assimilated by thinking, by logic, by sciencing. Traditionally, these areas are the prerogatives of the mind and have suffered the attentions of the schools. Antithetically, we find in that realm largely ignored by the schools those qualities which traditionally are housed in the heart and soul. These are called values, understandings, appreciations, feelings, and judgments. The former skills are mechanical, mathematical and scientific. The latter are creative, emotive, critical and aesthetic. The objects of science and the process of thinking focus on the transitory: art (whatever the medium), as

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a process, is the overcoming of the transitory. Art is sensuality given a soul. These two ways of knowing things are explored at some depth by the twentieth century German novelist Hermann Hesse in Narcissus and Goldmund. It is the cool-thinking and logical Narcissus who is made to see the integrity and wisdom of being able to know through the senses:

I am learning a great deal from you, Goldmund. I'm beginning to understand what art is. Formerly it seemed to me that, compared to thinking and science, it could not be taken altogether seriously. I thought something like this: since man is a dubious mixture of mind and matter, since the mind unlocks recognition of the eternal to him, while matter pulls him down and binds him to the transitory, he should strive away from the senses and toward the mind if he wishes to elevate his life and give it meaning. I did pretend, out of habit, to hold art in high esteem, but actually I was arrogant and looked down upon it. Only now do I realize how many paths there are to knowledge and that the path of the mind is not the only one, and perhaps not even the best one. (p. 293)

This whole idea had been expanded earlier into a systematic philosophy by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose system is significant in world thought aside from the fact that it was the only unified system to have been produced in over a hundred years. For a quarter of a century Balzac worked on parts of his Human Comedy, Wagner on his Ring cycle, Rodin on his Gates of Hell, and Proust on his Remembrances of Things Past. None of these, however, represents a systemic, organic, or logical whole, or a single perfected masterpiece. Instead of an all-embracing unity, they are easily broken down into a collection of fragments, motives, genre scenes, scraps and pieces. It was the direct intent of each of these creative thinkers to encompass all human experience in a single cumulative and universal structure, much as had been done by Hegel, Leibnitz, Kant and Thomas Aquinas. Regretably, none succeeded.

The one thinker in the past century or more who came nearest to making a coherent picture out of human experience was Bergson, who chose as his fundamental thesis a dictum attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, that one cannot step into the same river twice. Bergson's philosophy propounded the belief that the material universe is subject to the domination of a vital force (elan vitale), that it is in a state of "creative evolution," which is the basis of reality and truth, and that this process can be comprehended only by intuition and not by reason. Viewing the intellect as tending to reduce reality to immobility, he ranked intuition as a higher faculty than reason because through it the perception of the flow of duration was possible and through it static quantitative facts were quickened into the dynamic qualitative values of motion and change. Existence is never static but a transition between states and between moments of

duration. Experience, he taught, is durational, "a series of qualitative changes which melt into and permeate one another without precise outlines." Art, for Bergson, is the force that sets man free and through which he can grasp "certain rhythms of life and breath" which compel him even against his will "to fall in with it." Bergson was convinced that reality is mobility, tendency or "insipient change of direction."

Looking at or listening to a work of art is to perceive the mobile qualities of the objects or sounds presented. The aesthetic experience is essentially temporal and involves an "anticipation of movement" which permits the spectator or auditor in various ways "to grasp the future in the present." His theory of art is based on what he calls "spiritualistic materialism," by which finely perceived material activity elicits spiritual echoes. All is based on the "uniqueness of the moment" and perception of the temporal flow is synonymous with an awareness of the pulsation of life, something that is quite apart from the mechanical or from inert matter. Past, present and future are molded into an organic whole as "when we recall the notes of a tune melting, so to speak, into one another." Time, therefore, is "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances."

Thus, we have in Bergson's philosophy a system through which we can look at human experience. It is one of the paths to knowledge, and it is a path that looms with considerable import in an understanding of the aims and objectives of interdisciplinary Humanities. By and large, it is a path seldom exploited in the public school, and it is a path attracting more and more attention from educators because of intrinsic values. It is not a path to be terpsichored lightly and flippantly. The avenue of the Humanities is one to be approached with courage, honesty, and inexhaustible vitality, which casts the educator -- particularly the administrator -- in a role similar to Shakespeare's Hotspur in the First Part of Henry IV. (By using this metaphor, I am sure I have revealed more of myself than a knowledge of, and predilection for, the verse of Shakespeare in preference to that of Lenore Kandel, although the latter seems to be more read of late.) Hotspur is one of Shakespeare's most interesting secondary characters. He is a realist and a humanist. He is passionate and fearless, courageous, honest, and vital -- attributes which we like to find in school administrators approaching the problems of curricular change. In Shakespeare's play it is Hotspur's humane guilelessness that renders him dangerous in the world of political activity. In today's educational world it is the Humanities that poses the danger to the status quo inherent in the single -- concept framework of teaching and learning. In the words of Hotspur, "This is no world/To play with mamets and to tilt with lips./We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns,/And pass them current too." (II, iii, 93 ff.) In loose paraphrase, I would say that this is now the time to face reality squarely, to put down our cherished playthings and to "get with it." There will be impedimenta, of course, but a few "bloody noses" is a small price to pay for the values accruing to our students. So, to action!

What, then, are the principal characteristics of the Humanities program and what is that "cosmic glue" that binds its elements and makes it function as a systematic unity? A study of over five hundred exemplary programs across the country yielded fifteen major components and characteristics which are most often pointed out as the sine qua non of good Humanities programs.

1. There must be personal commitment on the parts of the faculty and administration that the concepts inherent in interdisciplinary Humanities are right and that this is indeed an important and justifiable path to knowledge. There are several implications in this statement: the school approaching its first Humanities course, or assessing a present one, should spend a great deal of time exploring the various precepts, mechanical considerations and values growing out of this kind of course offering for students; these data should be evaluated in terms of the local school objectives, resources and demands; a synthesis of the foregoing should produce a fairly clear picture of what Humanities can do for students in that school and how to go about it. While I know of no research data to substantiate the position I am about to take, it appears to me that the personally uncommitted and unconvinced teacher is more dangerous in a Humanities class than in an ordinary instructional situation. (I should like the opportunity to defend this position at another time.)

2. The attitude -- that is, the position, or relationship -- of Humanities involves a wide range of experiences and problems which require the formation of judgments, tastes, and values and will develop sensitivities and acuities. Just as there are many kinds and degrees of judgments, tastes, and values, so the range of experiences and problems provided for the learners should be chosen to exemplify as many of these as time allows rather than concentrating on repetition of one or two. The range of experience provided the students should be flexible and there should be no disciplinary boundaries superimposed; in fact, to put it more positively, the course should be interdisciplinary by design and should try as far as possible to involve elements from many disciplines in a balanced framework.

3. Because the inherent nature of Humanities is somewhat more complex than the traditional subject area and because it assumes a divergent philosophy, it is generally anticipated the course will be taught by some kind of instructional team. This might be composed of any number of regular faculty members -- representing expertise in different backgrounds -- or the team might be an individually responsible teacher supplemented by professional and non-professional authorities from within the school, from other schools, and from the community. Whatever the composition of the instructional team, it is abundantly clear that the best interests of the students are served only when there is true spirit of teammanship existing among the individuals. This is not to say there must be complete coincidence of ideas, interpretations and techniques, rather it allows for a variety of mutually supporting but dis-similar alternatives. Such breadth of experience becomes a strength of the program, not a weakness.

4. The good Humanities offering is non-dogmatic in approach -- (I say dogmatically!). The teachers are not an assemblage of latter-day Delphic oracles. Certainly the professional educator must be well-trained and knowledgeable in his field, but his authority should be expressed through planning and leadership, rather than through preachments verbally hurled at the class with all the terror of a judgment-rendering John Donne.

5. Induction is the teaching-learning technique best suited to Humanities. It calls upon the student to exert himself more in exploration among ideas and causes him to synthesize various conclusions into new discoveries. Exercise in inductive methodology results in the student's reaching his own judgments, establishing his own values, building his own critical models, expanding his own understandings and wisdom, and erecting his own aesthetic and philosophic codes. The standard lecture technique is deductive in approach and tends to pre-digest concepts and ideas for the students. It presents tailor-made, erector-set values, judgments, and appraisals. I would not suggest there is never room in the Humanities teaching strategy for deduction, but I would point out that an imbalance in favor of this technique is incompatible with ideal practices.

6. This characteristic is closely tied with the preceding two and focuses on the general atmosphere of the class as experienced by the students. The climate of the instructional span must feel as "free" as possible. The word "free" refers specifically to the ebb and flow of ideas, to the exercise of curiosity, to the lack of hesitancy in creative expression, and to the absence of teacher domination. Yet, that professional's presence must always be felt, just as Milton's mighty dove brooded on the vast abyss of universal chaos, making it pregnant. And I might further draw from Paradise Lost a charge to and battlecry of the Humanities teacher: to illumine in the students what is dark and to raise and support that which is low and base.

7. As has been mentioned earlier, students should be provided many and varying experiences on which to hone their judgments, values and appreciations. This is not to suggest that these experiences be chosen with complete abandon. On the contrary, the experience -- in toto and in all segments -- must be relatable to the students. Several considerations are important here: the background and preparation of the class; the age and maturity level of the students; the interests, curiosities and inclinations of the target group; the timeliness of the learning episode; and, of course, the contribution of that specific experience to the overall objectives and plan for the education of the learner. Whatever the choice, the student must be able to relate himself to the pervading ideas or concepts and must be able to generate a viable response to the stimulus. Sheer input is insufficient and test-day regurgitation is indicative of systemic weaknesses.

8. Of one commandment there is universal agreement among Humanities authorities: Humanities is for ALL students, for everyone, not just the academically proficient and elite, the ability-gifted, or the college-bound. The "cosmic glue" I referred to previously that unites the various and expansive elements of Humanities is the philosophic base for offering these courses to all students, regardless of ability or achievement. The Humanities deals with those

qualities of the individual human being which are humane, and as such, are exemplified and experienced by every person. Certainly the materials chosen for class study will vary according to student achievement and ability levels; but, the basic tenets outlined here will remain intact. There has been a certain tendency to reserve the Humanities class for the superior learner, but the practice is considerably suspect.

9. Just as all experiences designed for class consumption must be relatable to the students, so all resources and materials selected must be defensible in terms of previously established objectives in the course. Every item must make a significant contribution to the advancement of the student toward more mature, complex and broadened perspectives.

10. Humanities is all-encompassing, all-synthesizing; thus, advantage should be taken of all possible contributing factors. Obviously the trained faculty must bear the responsibility and carry the major share of the work load. But great benefit can accrue from supplementing the faculty with visiting authorities from the community. In addition to augmented human resources, every community offers possibilities for supplementing what is available within the school buildings. (In the small-group workshops earlier this afternoon I am sure you explored these resource possibilities in greater detail than I intend here.) Suffice to point out at this point that one valuable teacher planning aide is an up-to-date community resources inventory of what or who is available, for what purposes, on which topic, and when.

11. It should be apparent by now that Humanities embodies a scope of great breadth and depth. Because of these characteristics, we cannot dismiss the matter in a semester or two. Classwork should be designed to be offered over a longer time span, with each year's work concentrating on ever increasingly difficult problems, broadened exposures, more complex situations and expanded variables. Ideally, the program would run from the first grade through the twelfth, but it appears the most pressing need exists at the secondary level with increasing exigency from the seventh grade upward.

12. As there are several ways of knowing things, so Humanities involves several ways of presentation. I have mentioned inductive and synthesis techniques. Related to these is the position that in the good Humanities program physical experiences are de-emphasized in favor of preceptual ones. Especially is this applicable at times when students are responding to any specific stimulus: such as during discussions, in written work and on tests. Surely there are times and places for the mechanical considerations, but these should never be allowed to become ends; rather, they assume their rightful place as means to ends, which are contained in the ideas and concepts.

13. Sometimes it seems quite difficult to adequately and succinctly describe what Humanities is. It even appears to be easier to point out what Humanities is not; and heading this list is the following characteristic: Humanities in the school's instructional program is NOT a pink tutu around the waist (waste?) of the curriculum. To conceive of Humanities courses as window-dressing is to create a false condition, an injustice to course and students alike, and to perpetuate a caste-snobbery. To employ the mammet-concept toward Humanities is inconsistent

with its own precepts and I would caution against treating the program as a play-thing in the curriculum toybox. The intensive and extensive values preclude its being considered as anything less than a vital, integral part of the education of young people.

14. The Humanities stresses development of the senses, thereby opening another avenue of instruction all too often ignored; that is, creative expression. Any good program will make ample opportunity for students to learn through exercise of their own creative capacities. This, of course, adheres to the doctrine that we learn by doing, a practice long ago recognized to have merit in learning the natural sciences. The laboratory experience is no less viable in Humanities than in biology, chemistry and physics. The intent of the Humanities laboratory experience is not aimed at producing first rate painters, writers or musicians -- not at performance in general -- but to avoid second-hand learning and provide direct contact with the various media of human expression. If superior talent is discovered in the process, so much the better. It was the brilliantly gifted soprano Leontyne Price, who said: "You're not really a person until you've fulfilled yourself as an artist; you can't live until you've said what you have to say." The only way a person can have a chance to creatively express himself is if he is given the chance -- and that chance should be one of the functions of the modern school system.

15. Finally -- and perhaps somewhat redundantly by now -- don't teach Humanities: teach students! The corpus of ideas, concepts, materials and other resources that comprise Humanities are of no value and no importance in themselves. These are only the tools and a tool without application has no reason for being. The value of a hammer is in the driven nail. The importance of a saw is in the cut and fitted piece of wood. The essence of Humanities is in the impact on human lives and behaviors.

John Ciardi once said that a fool could look at the world and see nothing, while the skillfully perceptive and sensitive person could look at a cell, a leaf, or a moth and see the universe. I think this is the kind of graduate envisioned by the framers of the AASA position paper quoted at the outset: "It is important that pupils, as part of general education, learn to appreciate, to understand, create, and to criticize with discrimination those products of the mind, the voice, the hand and the body which give dignity to the person and exalt the spirit" -- and I would add -- and make it possible for each to see and feel the universe in the atom.